

## TÍA CHUCHA'S CENTRO CULTURAL & BOOKSTORE: A DREAM OF COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

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### FILLING A NEED

Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore was created to fill an important need in the Northeast San Fernando Valley—where 450,000 people (about the same population as Oakland), mostly Mexicans and Central Americans, did not have access to bookstores, art galleries or decent cultural spaces until Tía Chucha's opened its doors.

### TÍA CHUCHA'S CAFÉ CULTURAL

In 2001 Chicano author/poet [Luis J. Rodríguez](#), community activist Trini Rodríguez, and community leader Enrique Sánchez, founded the Centro as Tía Chucha's Café Cultural. The Centro was named after Luis' favorite aunt, who played guitar, wrote poetry and songs, sang, and even concocted her own



perfumes and colognes (although they smelled pretty bad). Luis wanted to honor Tía

Chucha's spirit of being a self-engendered and self-realized person, of taking risks to meet her passions, gifts, and destiny. Over time, we discovered many *Tías Chucha*: The lady who sold tamales on weekends turned out to be a great singer; the older gentleman who walked in seemingly out of nowhere was a wonderful Mexican muralist, poet, and singer; and a mechanic, who never read a book in his life, in one year read thirty. The impact of Tía Chucha's work in a community devoid of arts opportunities to enrich one's soul and mind was constant. The most moving story involved a 14-year-old girl who wanted to commit suicide until she heard the drums of our resident Azteca Danza

group—she joined, and a year later said she didn't want to kill herself anymore.

Located in the working-class community of Sylmar, Tía Chucha's consisted of a full coffee bar, bookstore, art gallery, performance space, and arts workshop center (art, music, theater, dance, and writing). Programming included theater and music presentations, poetry readings, Noches Bohemias (open mic for Spanish-language participants), Film Nights, Young Womyn's Circle, Jóvenes Nobles (a young men's rites of passage group) and Community Dialogues. In 2003, the importance of accessing a larger space in order to meet a growing need, motivated Luis, Angélica Loa and Víctor Mendoza to form [Tía Chucha's Centro Cultural](#) as a nonprofit arts center—next door to the café/bookstore. Our board of directors represents all communities served: Chicanos, African Americans, European Americans, and Asians.

### THE NEW CENTRO

We brought all the arts and healing workshops into the new Centro, along with **Tía Chucha Press**, which recently celebrated twenty years of publishing quality cross-cultural poetry from around the country; **Dos Manos Records**, a CD production project; and **Xispas**, a Chicano



online magazine. Tía Chucha's incorporated new programs including Young Warriors—an arts-based youth empowerment project, Mexicayotl indigenous cosmology, mural painting, and Capoeira (Brazilian Martial Arts/Dance). In the spring of 2006, we began

an annual literary & arts festival, “Celebrating Words: Written, Performed, and Sung;” and in 2007 we held our first annual benefit event at the 1,200-seat Ford Amphitheater in Hollywood called, “Tía Chucha’s Celebration of Community & Culture: Sí Se Puede!/Yes We Can!”

Tía Chucha’s presenting record includes such notables as Lalo Guerrero, the Godfather of Chicano Music; bands such as Quetzal, Very Be Careful, Los Cojolites, and Mezkla; original theater with Teatro Tres Chingazos, Teatro Chusma, and the EARTH Theater Company; and readings by Sandra Cisneros, Víctor Villaseñor, John Trudell, Yxta Maya Murray, Martín Espada, and Adrienne Rich, among others. Workshops include music (guitar, piano, Hip Hop DJing, African Drumming, Son Jarocho); art (painting, sculpture), and writing.

Over the years, Tía Chucha’s work has been acknowledged through grants from funding institutions including the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, LA County Arts Commission, LA City Department of Cultural Affairs, Liberty Hill Foundation, Center for Cultural Innovation, and The Annenberg Foundation. Individuals who support Tía Chucha’s work through donations include Bruce Springsteen, John Densmore of the Doors, Lou Adler, Richard Foos of Rhino Records, Tom Hayden, Jack Kornfield, and the Luis & Trini Rodríguez family.

## RELOCATION TO SYLMAR PLAZA

In 2007, Tía Chucha’s was forced out of its space when the landlords tripled our rent to make way for a high-end Laundromat—and temporarily moved to nearby Lake View Terrace to continue our programming until a larger space could be located. Answering the call to return to Sylmar, Tía Chucha’s just celebrated its relocation to Sylmar Plaza with a grand opening on March 28. Upcoming annual events are the *Celebrating Words* festival, slated for June 27 at Mission Community College; and *Celebrating Community & Culture: Sí Se Puede/Yes We Can!*, a benefit event on August 2 at Hollywood’s Ford Amphitheater.

## ART AND LITERACY: A CREATIVE STIMULUS IN HARD TIMES

[Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural & Bookstore](#) will continue to make art, dance, music, writing, theater, indigenous cosmology, and literacy the centerpiece of an ongoing economic/cultural revival in the largely neglected Northeast Valley communities. Tía Chucha’s artistic and educational resources are a much-needed creative stimulus in the midst of these



hard economic times. “In fact, it’s precisely in hard times that the arts become the engine for community

renewal and regeneration—the only way through today’s chaos and uncertainties is with creativity,” asserts [Luis Rodríguez](#), author of the best-selling memoir, *Always Running: la Vida Loca, Gang Days in LA*.

## THE VALUE OF CULTURAL SPACES

Cultural spaces and independent bookstores such as Tía Chucha’s are dying across the country. We have proven that they are badly needed and must be safeguarded from the vagaries of the marketplace, political shifts, and development. Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural is a model of what self-sustaining and organically tied community cultural spaces can be. As our tagline says: *Where Art and Minds Meet—For a Change!*”

[Tía Chucha’s Centro Cultural & Bookstore](#) receives funding from the California Arts Council’s Creating Public Value Program, contributing to the organization’s work in strengthening its community’s imaginative and creative capacity through arts and literacy programs—making books “cool” and relevant.

